

Children *and* War

Introduction by Barry S. Levy, MD MPH

In the midst of war, children are killed or die of malnutrition and disease. They are separated from family members. They are forced to flee their homes and their communities. They witness the torture and killing of their parents and other relatives.

Children are used as civilian shields to protect military forces or as army pack animals. They are imprisoned. They are beaten, wounded, or raped. If fathered by enemy soldiers, they may be rejected by their own mothers.

Children are forced to become soldiers, army slaves, or prostitutes under threat of violence or starvation. As soldiers, they are forced to kill people, even family members or friends. Those who survive war may be physically and psychologically maimed for the rest of their lives.

As a result of war, children grow up without families or homes, without communities or homelands, without a sense of their own—or others'—humanity.

Statistical data document the magnitude of these tragedies. But, as I have heard it said, statistics are people with the tears washed off. In these photographs and oral testimonies from the war in Sierra Leone—one of many current civil wars—David Parker conveys, *with* tears, the impact of war on children.

From a public health perspective, these tragedies can be overwhelming. But so were many other public health challenges that have now been successfully met.

Direct services must be provided to children who have

been affected by war. In addition, public health approaches, such as documentation, research, awareness-raising, and advocacy for effective preventive policies and programs, must be planned and implemented in order to minimize the impact of war on children and to prevent war itself.

In addition to the challenges facing public health professionals in nations at war are challenges for public health professionals in the United States, given our collective capabilities and experience, our nation's role as the leading world power, and our shared humanity.

With values, vision, and leadership, we can reduce the impact of war on children—and, one day, eliminate war.

Reference

1. United Nations Children's Fund. *The state of the world's children*. New York: UNICEF; 2000.

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Photographs and text by David Parker, MD MPH

Sierra Leone, a former British colony founded in the late 18th century for slaves freed by the British during the American revolution, is a small country on the west coast of Africa—nested between Guinea and Liberia. Number one in infant mortality in the world, Sierra Leone has a

per capita annual income of approximately \$US 160, and life expectancy remains at 38 years.¹ Only an estimated 34% of the population has access to potable water, and only about half the nation's children are vaccinated against polio.¹

Sierra Leone, which has struggled with democracy since gaining its independence in 1961, has been torn apart by one of Africa's most brutal wars since 1991. Fighting against the government is a group that calls itself the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Despite its name, the group appears to have only one objective—control of the nation's vast diamond resources.

In 1996, Tejan Kabbah, the democratically elected president was ousted in a military coup. He was subsequently reinstated by the Nigerian-led West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG. At present Sierra Leone has a fragile piece brokered by the United Nations.

In a nation with 4.5 million people, the conflict has resulted in the deaths of 75,000 people and left almost 3 million homeless. As part of its attempt to gain power, the RUF has conducted a campaign of terror, perpetrating some of the most brutal mutilations that have taken place anywhere in the world in recent years.

In late February and early March 2000, I had the opportunity to visit Sierra Leone with World Hope Inter-

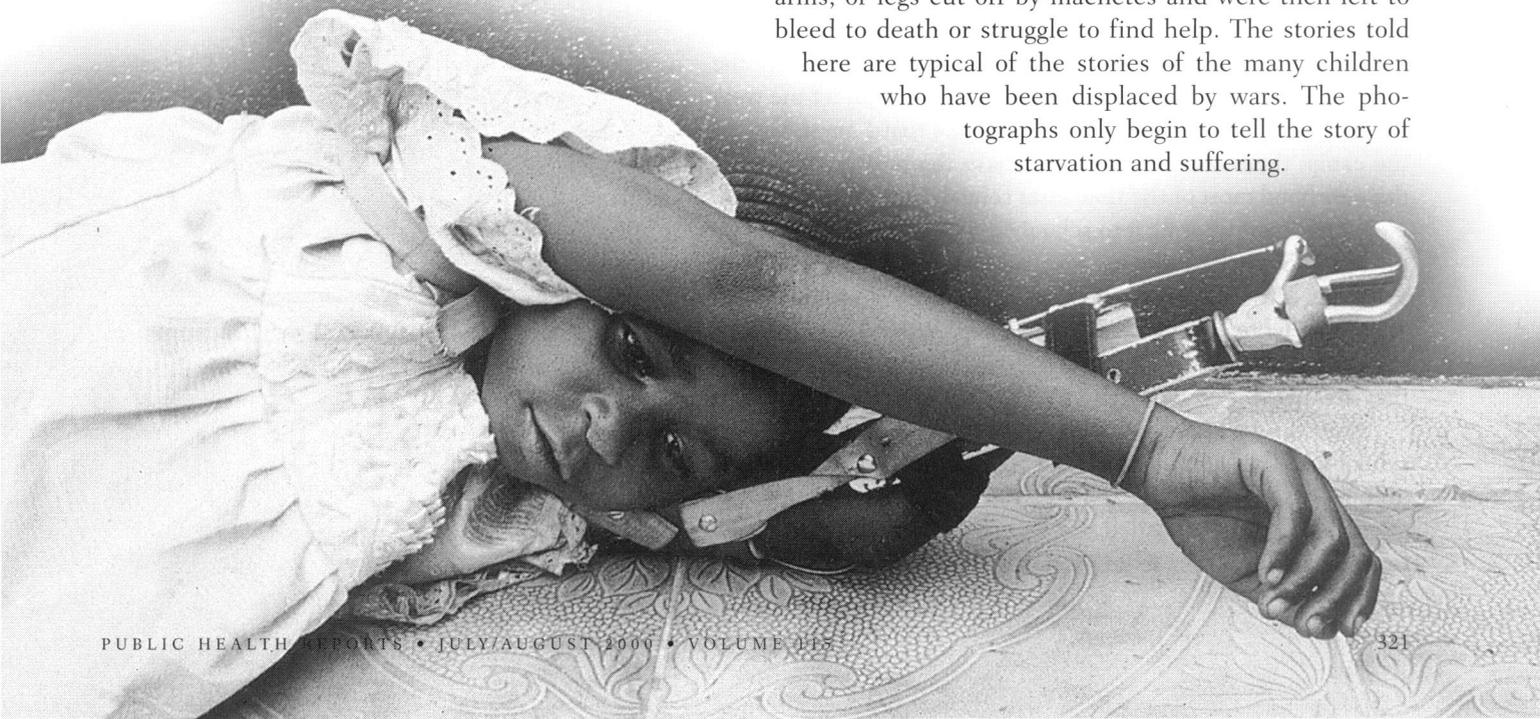
national, a nonprofit medical aid organization. At that time, thousands of women and girls were still being held by the RUF. Most, if not all, were sexual slaves and victims of sexual terrorism. An unknown number of children were armed.

Much of the medical infrastructure of Sierra Leone had been decimated. Hospitals had been looted. Health care workers reported that equipment that could not be moved was destroyed. I heard varied accounts about starvation in the country, but most of the people I talked to, including relief workers, agreed on several points: the country had little food, and the food supply was expected to dwindle even further during the rainy season; most people suffered from some degree of malnutrition; and severe infant and child malnutrition, a common sight, was rare before the war.

I spoke with dozens of people over a two-week period. Among them was not one person whose life had not been affected by the war. Most reported that they had seen acts of terrible brutality perpetrated against family members and neighbors. Many had their hands, arms, or legs cut off by machetes and were then left to bleed to death or struggle to find help. The stories told here are typical of the stories of the many children who have been displaced by wars. The photographs only begin to tell the story of starvation and suffering.

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I met Fatu when she was being fit for a prosthetic limb. She had been brought to the World Hope center by her grandmother. At the time we met, the family was living in the “amputee camp,” a refugee camp established for victims of the war. Like most residents of the crowded camp, she and her family subsisted on the small rations provided by the camp (usually a cup of bulgur wheat per day) and whatever food could be purchased with their meager earnings.

Fatu Koroma, Age 8: My name is Fatu Koroma. I am from Upline, from the village of Mafunto, near Port Loko, not far from Okra Hill. It is a small village, but many people live there. Before I was hurt we farmed rice. The day that the rebels came we were at the farm. At first, they held me but did not do anything to me. I said I needed to go to the bathroom. They said no because I would run. Then one of them said for me to go and get a piece of wood. Then the group of young men grabbed me, had me hold on to the piece of wood, and cut my hand off with a machete.

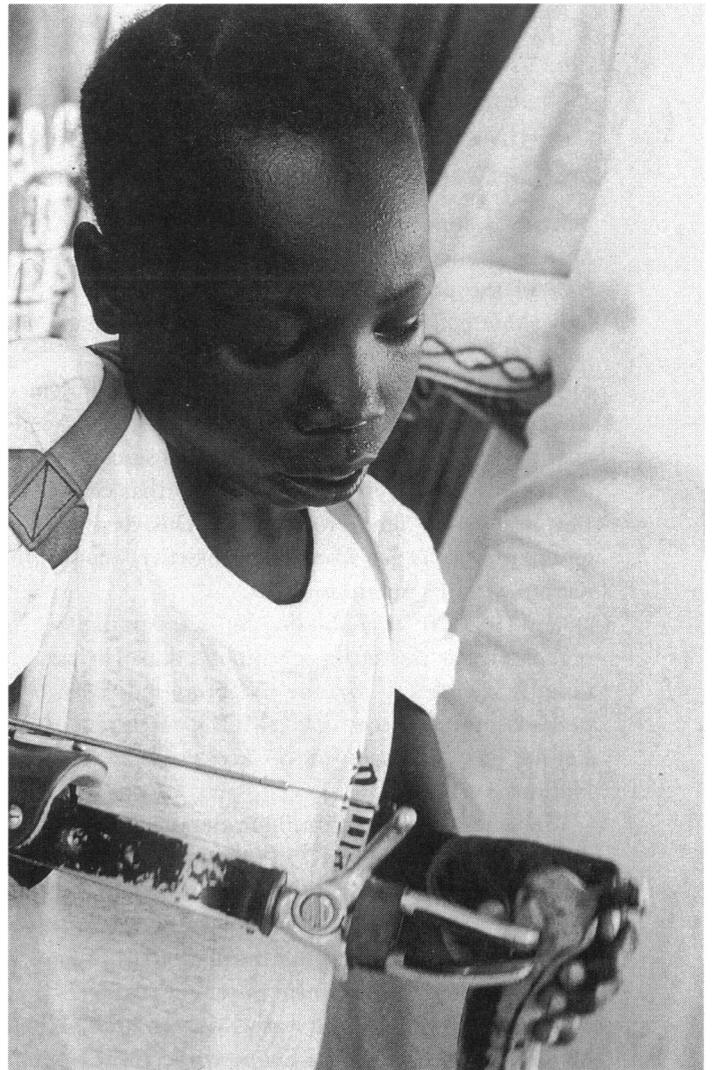
Then they told me, “Go to Tejan Kabbah, the President, and tell him to give you nice hands.” Then I walked for a long time. As I was walking I met an older man, and he said that he knew where the President was. Then he brought me to ECOMOG, and they took me. They wrapped and put medicine on my arm. I slept with them for two days, and they got tired of me.

Then I met Martha in Mashiaka and she took me to *Médecins Sans Frontières* [Doctors Without Borders]. I came to Freetown with *Médecins Sans Frontières* and Martha. Now I live with my grandmother. I also have a brother, they are in the camp in Aberdeen. That is where I live, also.

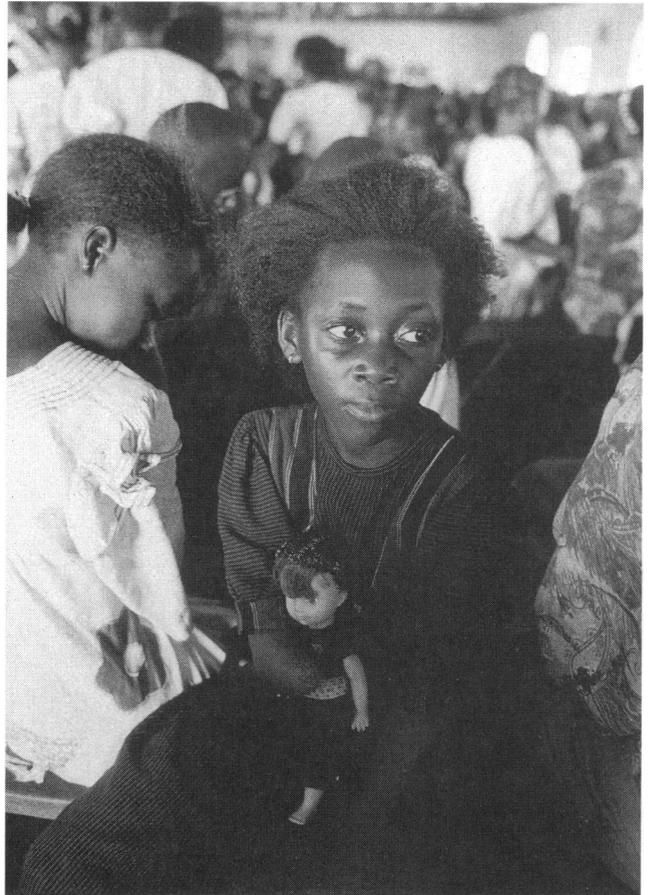
They killed my mom, my dad, and aunt and then they burned them. I am the youngest of the family. My next older sister was taken and held by the rebels. My sister saw my mother and my father when they died. ECOMOG found her, and they took her here. When we met she cried and she cried.

There was a kid who teased me once, and I hit him with the steel hand, so after that my grandmother would not let me wear the hand to school for awhile. In the school that I am in now, at the camp, there are other kids who have the prostheses. I wear the new hand most of the time after school, instead of to school. Now I will start wearing it to school again. I hold the pencil with my left hand. I used to write with my right hand, but now I am using my left. My new hand makes my heart glad, and I am starting to write again with my right hand. When I play with my friends I don't play with my hand because it is very strong and they are afraid.

After disarmament I want to go back ... to our home. The school and the house and all the village was burned. There is nothing left. Many people from my town are in the camp. Many people died and were killed that day. There are other amputees from my village in the amputee camp.



Fatu Koroma, Age 8



Girl with forearm amputated

In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.

Article 38, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*
(www.unicef.org/crc/fulltext.htm)



Girl with leg amputated



Grandmother and child at nutrition center

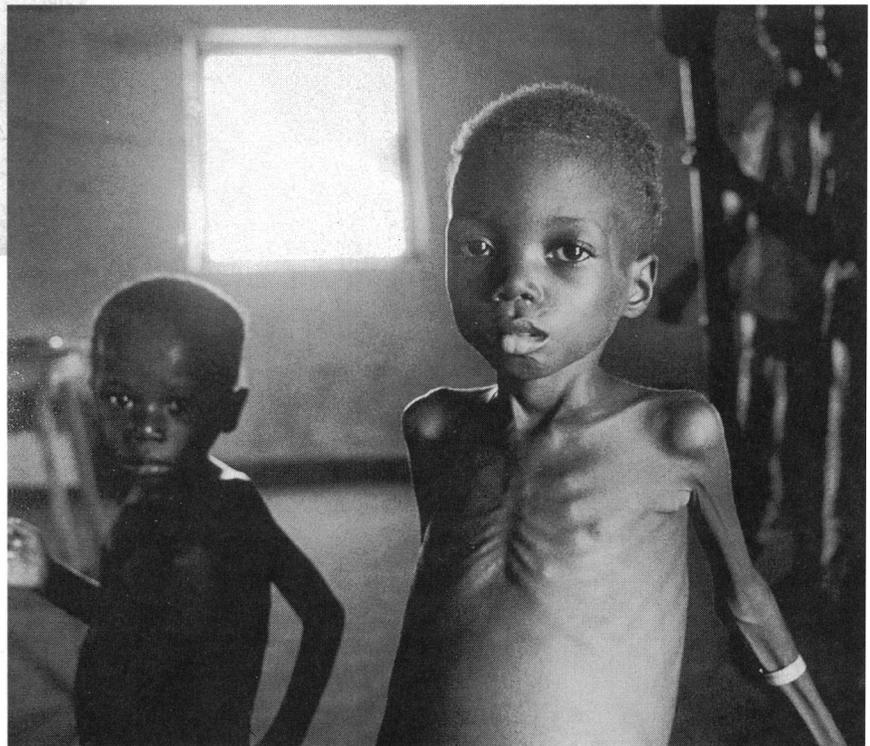
He who has saved one person, it is as though he has saved the world.

—Talmud

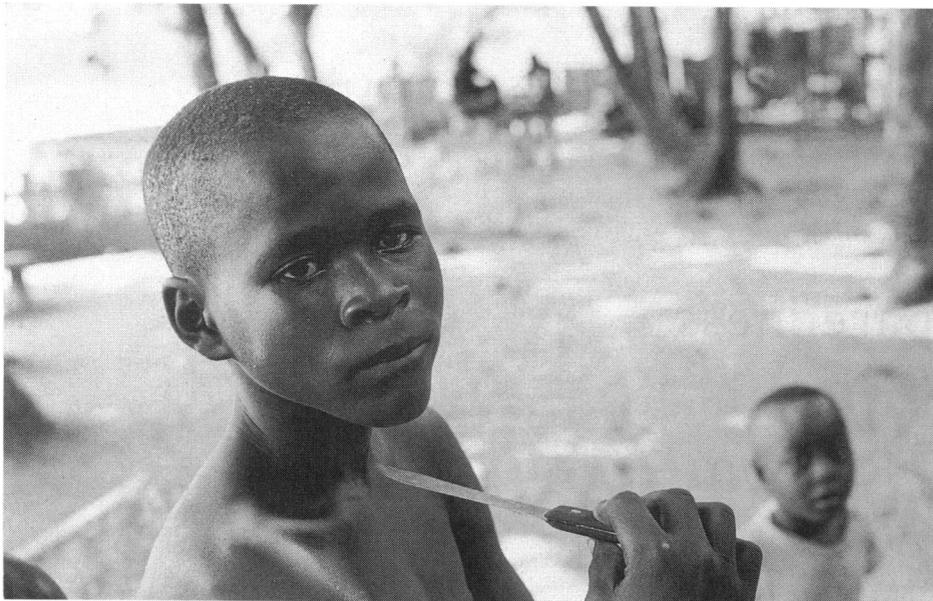
States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

Article 38, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

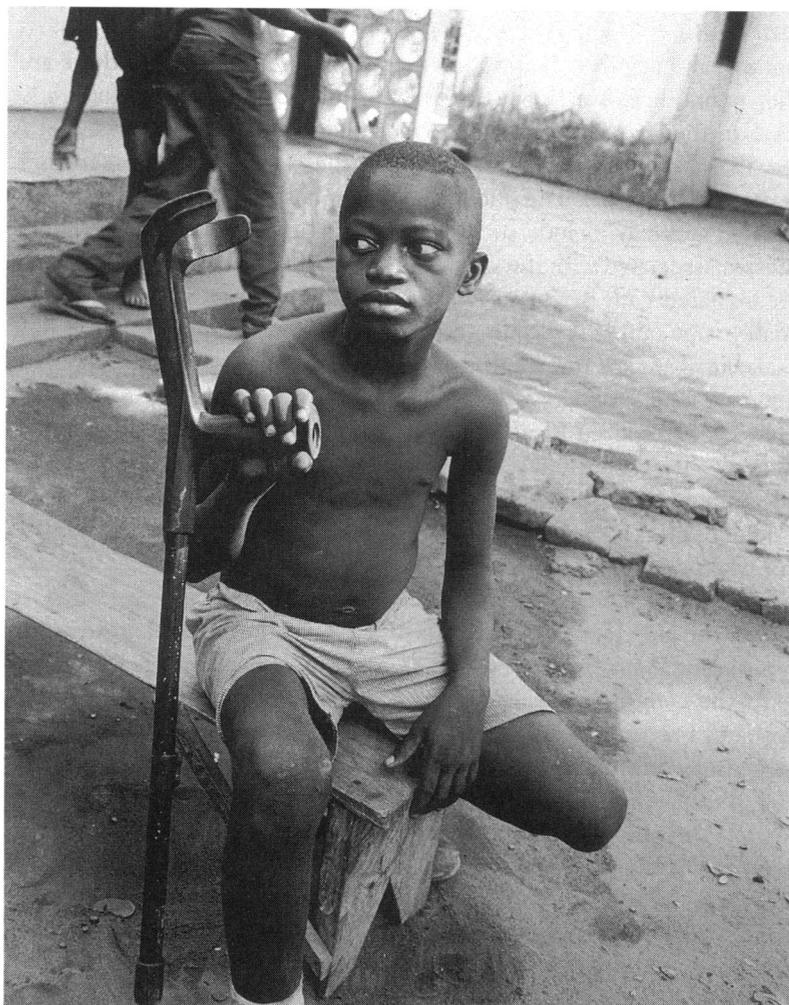
Kissy Grassfield is a small suburb on the outskirts of the city of Freetown. *Action contre la Faim* (Action Against Hunger), an international relief agency, has set up a feeding center there for severely malnourished children.



Children at nutrition center



Child soldier at rehabilitation center



Child soldier at rehabilitation center

I had the opportunity to make two visits to a child soldier rehabilitation center. Run by the Catholic church, the center was housed in a former luxury hotel on a beautiful beach just outside of Freetown. The children slept six to eight per room. During the day they attended a local school or studied a trade. Outside of the center, they were seen as pariahs because of the role they had played in the war. The following account was given by one of the boys at the center, although not one of the boys in these photographs.

Child soldier: I don't know how old I was when I first joined the rebel army, maybe 11. I fought for two years. I got hurt in the bush while I was a soldier. I was part of the attack force on Makeni; I stayed in Makeni, a town about 115 miles north of Freetown, for quite a while, and then said that I wanted to go find my family. I could not find them anywhere, so I went looking for them near the shop that our family had. The Fathers captured me and brought me here. I have been here for one year and two months.

I still wake up with nightmares. I think about the people we have killed—the people I have killed—and I wake up seeing them. I feel very bad about what has happened. Sometimes I still fight, but not very often. The Catholic Fathers don't let us fight.... When someone offends me, if there is no action (*punishment by the Fathers*), then I want to fight. Sometimes, kids and community people will start pointing at [us], saying, "These are the rebels"...and that makes me angry....

I really like living here.... I like swimming, and then I do like studying and working on my assignments...English, social studies. There are nine of us in one room. The food is good, and the mangoes are good.

I have family, but I don't know where they are. I would like to keep on going to school. People often ask me what I would like to do when I finish school. Well, I would like to be whatever God wants me to be.... I would like to be a farmer. I don't have any land, but I am learning farming here at the camp. ■